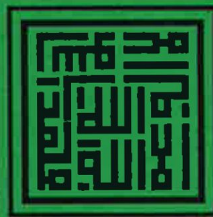


A few brief reflections
of a Muslim
living *in* early 21st century
post-modern America

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my computer tech is a Hindoo from Kansas,
my herbalist is a Taoist, my landlord is a Christian,
my mechanic is a born-again Evangelical,
and my cat is a Siamese.”
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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

A few weeks ago one of the editors at *Dialogue & Alliance* sent me an e-mail suggesting that I might want to write an article “taking up the matter of Muslim life in Western and so-called ‘Christian’ countries and societies.”

This is in response to that request.

First off let me tell you a little about myself.

I am a seventy year old Scots-Irish man with, alḥamdulilāh eight living children, thirteen grand-children and a great grand-child on the way, ʾinshāʾAllāh. Part of my family came to Virginia in the mid 1700’s. Yet another family member came to Boston via Jamaica, as a white slave (yes there were white as well as black slaves), sold by militant English colonizers because he refused to stop teaching in Gælic in the hedgerows of Eire. I am a Son of the American Revolution, jailed in the 50’s for participation in the anti-war movement, a visionary mystically oriented artist, a pioneer in the Communal movement of the 60’s, a voluntary exile off and on for much of the 70’s and part of the 90’s, who is amazed, shocked and sickened by what has become of this country in this century with its ‘Patriot Act’, ‘Homeland Security’ (sounds sort of Teutonic doesn’t it?), border fences, SWAT teams on the streets, surveillance cameras everywhere and armed soldiers in the airports.

I have also been a Muslim for some forty years now and have lived not only in America but also for long periods in Africa and Asia, almost always in countries that have a majority Muslim population, and have spent time both visiting and working in the more rural and mountainous parts of Europe.

There are of course those who say that such things as the 'Patriot Act' and 'Homeland Security' and excessive, often humiliating searches at airports are only the result of what 'you' Muslims did on 9/11 and other terrorist actions 'you' carried out in the Philippines, Bali, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Dar Fur, Somalia, Madrid and London.

One of the results of 9/11 that all Muslims endure is that we are now no longer individuals but are a "religion" and, as such, have become answerable and accountable for what our fellow religionists did and do in various parts of the world — what used to be termed, in the McCarthy era, guilt by association.

It is as though guilt can be assigned to all Christians for the excesses of Hitler (who during his last day in his Berlin bunker avidly read the New Testament) or Stalin (an altar boy in his youth), who between them killed some 18 million; or Bomber Harris of the RAF, who ordered the fire-bombing of Dresden but not the bombing of the rail-lines that lead to Dachau and Buchenwald, though they were well known; or Truman, who ordered the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic weapons; or for that matter all Han Chinese for the excesses of Mao, who killed off some 12 million fellow Chinese. Do we blame all Cambodians for the extermination of 2 million by Pol Pot, or all Hutus and Tutsis for the genocide in Rwanda?

But to be a Muslim in early 21st C. America, although it is not always said aloud or only hinted at or legislated against, is to be the 'enemy', is to be the 'terrorist', is to be the 'suspect'.

Take care if your name is Muhammad or Abdullah or Husayn or Fatima or A'isha or Khadijah. Get used to being asked to 'step aside' at the airport, to being heavily scrutinized, to having your phone or e-mail tapped or recorded without a warrant.

Take care if you are brown or black and have a beard or wear 'foreign' clothes or a 'skull cap' or, worse, if you are a woman, and wear the freakishly frightening VEIL that brings down governments; and never mind that Maryam, the mother of Jesus, peace be upon them, wears one in every statue you see.

To be a Muslim and live as a Muslim in 21st Century America is a scary and often humiliating experience brought about by the action of a small minority within the Muslim community.

It doesn't matter that the same lunatic terrorists can be found among every faith-based group. Reflect on the fundamentalist Jewish terrorist who invaded the Mosque in al-Khalil [Hebron] and machine-gunned the people who were in the act of prayer. Think about the ideological settlers who have infiltrated the IDF, who maintain the checkpoints and barricades, who fly helicopter gunships and jet fighters, the ones who arrange so-called "targeted assassinations and military incursions" ¹

What about the 'Hindoo' RSS fascists in Gujerat, India, land of non-violence and Mahatma Ghandi, where recently Muslims were raped, burnt and killed for something they never did? What about the 'Buddhist' fanatics (yes, even some Buddhists are terrorists and fanatics) in Sri Lanka who pioneered suicide bombing? What about homegrown 'Christian' terrorists like Timothy McVeigh and those with him who took down an entire federal building one sunny morning in Oklahoma?

Actually, if you shut your eyes and just listen, all fanatics, 'Christian', 'Jewish', 'Muslim', 'Hindoo', 'Sikh', 'Buddhist' and 'Confucian' sound alike, and I have also found they even look alike in some strange way.

No one religion has a corner on this madness and all religions have members who are willing to carry out the most terrible of acts, but that is pretty much overlooked in present day America where it is the Muslim who is, as they used to say on the radio shows of my youth, Public Enemy Number One.

If you were to go back a hundred years, in the American popular press of the day you would find the same attitudes, the same fear factor, the same cartoons with swarthy hook-nosed, black-hatted, bearded bomb-throwing fanatics, but then they were termed the 'Internationalist Jewish Anarchist Menace' Now they are called 'Islamofascists' and are funded by sleazy looking swarthy hook nosed petroArabs in flowing robes.

What is really at the root of all of this is racism and an anti-Semitism (Arabs are, after all, Semites by definition) that is endemic in America, and also for that matter — dare one say it — European Christendom, both then and in the hidden now.

Isn't the current Muslim mania really an old-time phenomena that has been around since the time of the Crusades? Is it not perhaps possible that the fear of Muslim terrorists comes from 'so-called Christians' looking at their own selves in the mirror and scaring themselves by what they see, calling it the 'other'?

Recently I listened on the BBC to an Afghan father, whose whole family had been wiped out by an attack by a unmanned aerial predator drone, trying to speak through his grief. I can't quote exactly what he said but the words were to this effect:

"OK. Suppose Bin Ladin ordered those planes to fly into those buildings. OK. How many people died? Some 3,000. OK. How many people have now been killed in Afghanistan? OK, we Afghans understand an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth but how come 10 eyes for one eye or 100 teeth for one tooth? Besides, Bin Ladin is not even an Afghan. He is a Saudi and most of the fliers were Saudis. How come America doesn't bomb Saudia? I didn't do anything and for sure my wife and kids didn't do anything, yet now they are all dead. For what?"

Recently I saw a bumper sticker that asked, "Who would Jesus bomb?" This, in a time when we have a strong 'Christian' president and there are serious efforts under way to re-write our Constitution to read that "America is a Christian country."

How is that? If America is truly a 'Christian' nation what specifically is 'Christian' about the war in Iraq? What is 'Christian' about our support of the worst kind of dictators, despots, war lords and oppressors of all stripes throughout the world? What is 'Christian' about building a wall across our southern border and calling out the National Guard to patrol that border lest any of those 'pesky brown-skinned *mesicans*' sneak in to the Land of Opportunity? The land of Peace and Justice for All. What happened to the Beatitudes of Christ?

What is 'Christian' about maintaining the largest number of atomic weapons in the world? What is 'Christian' about spending 10 times more than all the nations in the world on weapons of death and destruction? For that matter, what is 'Christian' about being the world's greatest emitter of toxic waste?

Who was it who said that fascism will come to America wrapped in the flag and holding aloft the cross?

Whoever it was knew what they were talking about.

In China they say that a ruler can only rule as long as he has the Mandate of Heaven. For a long time America was seen in the larger world as having that Heavenly Mandate, but due to the actions of the past years that Mandate has been withdrawn; that Mandate has been lifted, and the shining city on a hill has turned out to be just another Potemkin village.

As the song says, "People! Take a good look around. Take a look at what's goin' down."

And while all this is going down. While the 'precision' bombs are dropping. While the prisoners are being waterboarded. While whole towns are destroyed. While orchards are uprooted and wells are polluted, pregnant women held at 'check points' until they loose their babies, old folks humiliated by boys (and girls) with guns, young girls strip searched and young male prisoners with bras and panties on their heads face the menacing dogs. While the poor and old are overlooked, blue and white collar workers out-sourced, while the tops of West Virginian mountains are leveled in the search for ever more coal and the rural people of the valleys poisoned, while women still earn only 70% of what men do, while there are 2.3 million prisoners in America, one and a half times that of China whose population is four times greater, and the majority of those imprisoned are black and brown even though they are in the 'minority'. While people of Middle Eastern descent, who have lived peacefully in their communities for years, are arrested without habeas corpus and those upon whom suspicion falls are subject to extraordinary rendition — it seems no one cares.

While all this is going down a black man, a white woman and a former prisoner of war are running for president of America.

Underneath the fabricated fear, underneath the spin, underneath the cynicism, underneath the inflamed hatreds something else is stirring because people are sick of fear and sick of hatred.

Something is stirring which has nothing to do with an America with an established state religion but rather an America where if you are a Buddhist or a Hindoo or a Christian or a Jew or a Muslim or an atheist, that is, as the founding fathers meant it to be, a matter of personal choice.

In some places where the majority and established 'religion' is so established as to be transparent — perhaps in villages in far distant places — there remains the outside possibility that some people actually might live a 'traditional' form of life. But the likelihood is that (especially in urban areas) diverse people have been thrown together in a way that was unimaginable before the industrial revolution, the age of steam, and the rapid travels of people or ideas to the most distant parts of the globe. This is ever more the case in a time in which millions routinely fly from JFK to Chinmai or Shanghai or...Bali, Moscow or Patagonia or Papua or commute via internet around the world.

The traditional fabric barely exists anywhere anymore or, anywhere it manages to exist, it is under attack by the satellite dish and all that comes through it due to the *shayṭān* that everybody invited to take up residence in a box in a corner of their home where plays the TV, the CD, the DVD and the HiDef BluRay.

In the post-modern world — at least until the new world order breaks down due to critical environmental overload (and that is another time yet to come perhaps for those who are here and those who will come) — people have to find a way to live with other people so that all may live or, inevitably, all will suffer.

It remains to be seen if this is the time and place where we will learn to accept one another and live at peace and in harmony with our neighbor whoever or whatever that neighbor may be.

The only absolute test of the reality of any faith tradition is the good deeds (*ʿamal salih*) that those who practice it actually perform and make manifest in the every-day physical world.

Muslims are told that our Prophet ﷺ is a prophet filled with compassion for all beings...for all worlds.² A prophet who was deeply concerned for his fellow beings; who was kind, forgiving. That more people are not aware of his nature is the failure of Muslims to practice what he ﷺ preached and the failure of non-Muslims to understand who...and what he was and is ﷺ.

We have always known, because of what Allah ﷻ taught and the Prophet ﷺ demonstrated, that the only way we could truly practice the religion (aside from culture & custom) is by being a mercy to all whom we meet regardless of what color, shape, form or belief the other is or where they come from or what language they speak. 'With mercy for all and malice towards none' has always been the call of the true Muslim regardless of the acts of an ignorant and arrogant few. We fully understand that psychopaths come in all colors, sizes, shapes, and from all religions and every nation and region. They all in common believe that it is "my way or the highway", or "My daddy [G-d, bomb, religion, ideology] is bigger than yours so shut up and do what I say and give me what I want or I will kill you."

Dog eat dog and the big dog eats first and run for your life.

This is, for the most part how the modern world works.

I wonder what it is that drives people to the point where they are willing to cross the line of murder? Where and when does it become possible for one human being to rape or maim or kill another human because he or she is not of the same color or tribal identity or language or religion? At what point does it become impossible to live in the same time and space; in the same city, in the same country? For what reason do some people (often from the media, the military, the world of politics or so-called 'religious' figures) fan people's xenophobic fears of the unknown and use that fear as an excuse to bomb, shell and mortar the unknown 'other' into death and oblivion?

The bullet is the ultimate consumer item. Use it once and it is gone, but it seems there is always another round to chamber. Another gook, rag head, sand nigger or haji to blow away.

Sacha 'Borat' Cohen sang, "Throw the Jew down the well" but it might as well be the Muslim, the Black or the Mexican, or whoever. To hell with them all...throw them all down the well.

We know our neighbors aren't monsters, but in the society as a whole there is a deep undercurrent of hatred and racism that the Rev. King and, more recently, the Rev. Wright focused on and Sen. Obama tried to explicate in his Philadelphia speech.

If you are an African-American, a Native American, a Muslim of an undocumented worker, you can feel it. It is palpable.

One of my own first moments of awakening to this truth came in my work as a volunteer prison chaplain when an Afro-American brother told me, "Don't nobody white look AT us. Don't nobody white talk TO us. They talk to the floor or to the wall, to the right of me or the left of me but they never look me in the face, they never look me in the eye, they never talk to me but instead they talk AT me. They refuse to acknowledge that I am a man; that I too am a human being."

How could it be that some one is better than another because of their color or lack of it? How could it be that someone is better than some else because of the language they speak? Or the money they have, or the car they drive or the house they live in or, for that matter, the country they live in? How could it be?

How do people, many of them the 'so called Christians' the editor mentioned in his brief, actually believe that? And yet by their actions and words, it would seem they do.

Drive the highways and see the millions of cars with bumper stickers reading "God Bless America". That is good but how about Canada? How about Mexico? How about China or India? How about Africa? How about the whole rest of the planet? Do such people honestly believe that 'God' should bless only America and 'God' should damn everyone else?

That the rest of the world should just go to hell? Outta sight, outta mind. If so, then what kind of 'God' would that be?

If you asked most of them they might say, "No. You know what I mean. God bless America, land of the free, home of the brave. I don't have anything against anyone. It's just that..."

Just what?

I think sometimes it has to do with the subliminal message in Michaelangelo's iconic painting of G-d as a big old bearded white man seated on a cloud way up in the middle of the air. "He" must be the really Big doG, the One that always eats first, the One to whom everyone has to answer.

And as you can plainly see, 'He' is White, and if 'He' is white and 'He' is Right and I am white then I too must be right. Something like that. Maybe. And still...yet more subtle.

I don't know the full answer to these questions but I do know that the way things are going at this point will inevitably have to change or we shall finally tear ourselves apart and embrace what former UN Director General Butros Ghali, on his return from Rawanda, called the "Culture of Death".

I truly like my lapsed Jewish doctor with Buddhist leanings because he is kind and caring, my Hindoo techie, my Taoist herbalist., my Evangelical mechanic and I love my Siamese cat but I confess I have no time left for the bigots, the racists, the fascists, the haters be they 'Hindoo', 'Jewish', 'Taoist', 'Siamese' or 'Muslim', and especially if they are Muslims, because they ought to know better, because Allāh ﷻ has explained the Reality of the Prophet ﷺ of compassion for all beings and all worlds, who was concerned in a friendly way for his fellow beings; a Prophet ﷺ of forgiveness and mercy.³

Allāh ﷻ teaches us to speak to *other* people with "good words"⁴ and to "vie with them with good works".⁵

It is my sincere hope that through my deeds and by my witnessing (*shahadah*) people might have a change of heart and seek to understand ^oIslām instead of warring against it.

But in the end I know that it is only Allāh ﷻ who truly changes the hearts. My task is to live in this world in such a way that I can help, through my actions, through my deeds, be they great or be they small, to bring about peace and justice and mercy and love. To love all; to serve all. To be good; to do good. What is called in Islāmic thought the principle of *maslahah*, which means to act in a wholesome and sound manner with the intention (*niyah*) of bringing about the greatest good for the greatest number of one's fellow beings.

I believe this truth in Truth because Allāh *is* One, and consequently all religions must inevitably derive from Allāh ﷻ for there is none other than Allāh. Of this the Prophet ﷺ says, "All the Prophets ﷺ are brothers to one another."⁶

Because I believe Allāh ﷻ is, at the most basic level of Being, *The Mercy* and *The Compassion*, consequentially I believe that all religions must have this message at their heart and their core — this message of Mercy and Compassion.

Regrettably people don't listen, or can't hear, or are impatient, or are filled with pride and angry and, in turn, are frustrated and manipulated, incarcerated in the prison of otherness — lost in the heat of endless battle and the fogs of war.

It's time to take a chance and escape the self-defeating prison of hatred and otherness. It's time again to make love, not war.

¹ see "Tough Love for Israel" Ari Melber, *The Nation*, May 5th

² "And We have not sent you save as a mercy for the all the worlds (*alt*: all people). Qur'ān 21:107

³ "There has come to you a messenger from among your selves. Greivous to him is what you suffer, full of concern for you, to the believers kind and compassionate. Qur'ān 9:128

⁴ "...and give the good news to those who believe and perform righteous deeds ..." Qur'ān 2:25

⁵ "...of the People of the Book there is an upright community that recite the Verses of Allāh in the night and they bow down. They believe in G-d and in the Final Day and enjoin the doing of good and forbid the doing of evil and they vie with one another in good works." Qur'ān 3:113-114

⁶ Reported by Muslim in his collection of Sahih Ḥadith



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